

University of Mary Washington's Quality Enhancement Plan The First-Year Seminar: Research, Write, Speak

The University of Mary Washington (UMW), a public comprehensive liberal arts and sciences university with approximately 4,400 undergraduate and 500 graduate students, has a long history of executing high impact practices to enhance student learning. A four-course writing intensive requirement and a two-course speaking intensive requirement are both supported by peer consulting centers directed by professional staff. Following best practices and modeled by other institutions, UMW's efforts have bolstered its long-standing commitment to a liberal arts education.



As part of a sweeping overhaul of the general education program, UMW established a First-Year Seminar requirement in 2008. This three-credit course, required of all first-year undergraduates, is designed to help students cultivate the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind necessary for liberal learning through the in-depth study of a topic in a seminar setting. One expectation of the course is the provision of instruction on how to gather and analyze information for the purpose of formulating, defending, and communicating an opinion. Individual FSEM courses, distributed across various academic departments, involve topics requiring no prior background or discipline-specific knowledge. Course titles reflect the rich variety of experiences offered; "Mozart and 'Amadeus,'" "Finding Fashion," the "Graphic Novel," "Infographics," "Cinderella and Harry Potter," and "Energy Resources in the 21st Century." Since 2008, more than ninety individual FSEM courses have been developed and offered.

While the 2008 FSEM requirement established general course goals, it had ill-defined student learning outcomes and insufficient support for faculty who were tasked with implementing an ambitious introductory college-level experience in oral communication, written communication, and information literacy. Consequently, UMW's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is designed to enhance the existing FSEM as a foundational liberal arts educational experience. The plan establishes a rigorous and clearly defined set of integrated FSEM learning outcomes in the areas of information literacy, writing, and oral communication reinforced by a suite of instructional resources designed to assist students and faculty.

The impact of UMW's QEP will be felt in three core areas. First is the development of the on-line learning modules designed to move introductory and developmental material out of the classroom and into a high-quality on-line delivery method. The QEP provides funding for both the technical and creative development of these modules. Over a three-year period, the plan envisions the creation of at least twelve modules distributed across the three skills areas. Second, the QEP enhances the peer tutoring provided to first-year students in the Writing and Speaking Centers and inaugurates peer support for students on information literacy skill development offered through the Library. Third, the QEP will increase the diversity of courses satisfying the FSEM requirement. Working with the QEP Director, faculty from departments across campus will use the resources of the QEP to develop new courses and enhance their existing courses to meet the goals of the new student learning outcomes.